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Mr. Chairman,
Honorable Members of the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives.

My name is Alex Rondos. I served as Ambassador of Greece and Adviser to the Foreign Minister of Greece until March 2004. In the last six years, I have been intimately involved in the diplomacy concerning the Balkan region. In the course of the last year, I have been privileged to be a member of the International Commission on the Balkans, whose report was recently published.

This hearing is timely and I am grateful for the opportunity you have given me to testify.

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The situation throughout the Western Balkans is fraught with both danger and opportunity. Along with my follow members of the International Commission on the Balkans, I subscribe fully to the view that the status quo in the region is not sustainable. We have countries and entities that live in a constitutional limbo. This has stunted economic growth, leading to alarmingly high levels of unemployment and to the penetration of the region by organized crime. The result is that the democracy we seek for the Balkans is still fragile.

Our view, if I may loosely and more forcefully paraphrase my fellow Commissioners, is that the time has come for the political leadership of the region and of the European Union to rise to their historic responsibilities. Together, they must consolidate that grand vision of peace and prosperity that is the European Union. When all the peoples of all the Balkans cease to be mere inhabitants of geographical Europe and become fully fledged citizens of the European Union, we will have placed a vital block into the edifice of global peace and stability.

This is not easy, but it is certainly possible. Hard, politically costly reforms are necessary to attain membership in the European Union. The EU is a club to which entry is only achieved by total conformity with its rules and practices. To achieve this, therefore, requires the highest level of political will and political skill. This applies to both the region's politicians and to those of Europe.

For us to fall short now on the European destiny of the Balkans would be to trip over the last hurdles of a long and well-run race. I believe that we in the region must move beyond the politics of the "winner takes all" and ask, instead, how all can be winners. In the European Union, we must find it in ourselves to gaze less at our navels and more into the future. It is not possible to imagine and believe in the security of Europe and of a constructive European role in global security, as I do, if we have not taken the essential steps to resolve the status and fate of an entire region that is part of our continent.

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This brings us to the question of Kosovo's status. It is a challenge too often addressed as a short-term policy issue, in the absence of a regional and a global strategic context.

The fixation on the final outcome, before a political process has been engaged, has sucked many into a debate that is almost theologically absolute, precluding room for flexibility, negotiation, and compromise. Moreover, the more extreme the positions taken, the less the attention that is paid to the regional implications of any solution.

The present impasse is shaped by a deeply felt dispute over independence and sovereignty. One side argues that until there is substantial evidence of a sovereign capacity to exercise the rule of law democratically, the very notion of independence cannot be contemplated. The other argues that only when independence is granted can sovereign attributes be developed and implemented. In very practical political terms, this means that both sides have retreated into a corner from which they will only extricate themselves at considerable political cost. Thus, the temptation for some, in and out of the

region, to argue that the Gordian Knot of Kosovo needs to be sliced by an imposed decision.

I would argue that such approach would be a denial of both diplomacy and democracy. It would have dangerous consequences in a region that in fact urgently needs a concentrated dose of diplomacy and democracy. Furthermore, this type of approach will not address overnight what has not been achieved in the six years since Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo and the area came under the control of the United Nations.

Allow me to paint a picture of the conditions that pertain in the region. The youth of Kosovo, who represent a very high proportion of the population, are unemployed. A significant proportion of the revenue that flows in Kosovo is illegal, controlled by highly organized groups that frighten their co-citizens into compliance and that are very well connected beyond Kosovo's frontiers. Kosovo cannot even borrow money to invest in its economic growth. Administration has shifted gradually into Kosovar hands, but major decisions ultimately remain with the international authorities. Respect for the law, the judiciary, and the police is tenuous. I cannot feel anything but the deepest sympathy for the average citizen of Kosovo. Who, after having had a war fought on their behalf by the West, would believe that they still had to live in circumstances that would be unacceptable in any of our societies and political systems?

Special sympathy and concern should be reserved for minority populations in Kosovo. The Roma, who suffer from lack of representation internationally, are isolated and ignored. But the treatment meted out to those Serbs who have remained in Kosovo defies logic, imagination, and any political apology. Apart from Mitrovica in the north of Kosovo, the Serbs live in village communities, few of them contiguous. But these are not really villages, since that would imply a semblance of normal life. These are ghettoes. Survival within them depends on supplies brought from outside. Movement beyond these ghettoes requires armed escorts. The desecration of churches reached a tragic apogee in March 2004. Serbs have been excluded from employment in key public-sector corporations. Under these circumstances, there is no future for these populations. On the

contrary, for those of us who know the history of our region, one can detect the symptoms of a calculated effort to separate, swamp, and asphyxiate a community into disappearance.

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These, regrettably, are the primary characteristics of Kosovo today. It should come as no surprise, then, that some might wonder whether this entity would be a welcome independent neighbor. But this merits further elaboration. The fate of Kosovo is inextricably intertwined with the future stability of the region and its immediate neighbors. It is not enough to argue that Kosovo is emblematic of what is least desirable in the region—that is an injustice to much of the population which, if led responsibly, would aspire to all those good things in life that any one of us seek for ourselves and our children.

The problem for us lies elsewhere. Kosovo, to use a biological analogy, is host to more than one virus that the region has struggled to contain and eliminate. Nationalism, organized crime, and abused democracy, when not contained, mutate into irredentism, terror, and oppression. The region has paid a high price for the last three and it does not want more.

The proverbial elephant in the room of southern Balkan politics is Albanian nationalism. Of all the peoples of the Balkans, the Albanian populations are the only ones that have not yet had their crack at national unification. In the last 80 years or so, with a hiatus for communism, all of the rest have had their chance, invariably with tragic consequences. Can this very natural force among Albanians, and especially those of Kosovo, be steered away from the trap of irredentism and violence? Can it be steered towards a natural place in the European order, where it is possible to celebrate one's identity and freedom with less care for independence and all the attendant trappings? The journey from where we are now to that special place will be long and filled with opportunities to be tempted by the less savory aspects of nationalism.

Central to the management of Kosovo's status will be the establishment of secure frontiers. Until a mere 15 years ago, the people of Kosovo were one with the Albanian communities in the Tetovo region of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Now, however, a trip between neighboring villages that once took minutes has been transformed into an odyssey that consumes hours. The cost is great, the economic isolation is crippling. The survival of FYROM has occupied the attention of many a policymaker in recent years. It should continue to do so. But let us not allow desire to blind us to reality. The country's majority populations are busy un-mixing themselves. The non-Albanians, looking warily at the demographic expansion of the Albanian population, wonder who will be the majority and who the minority within a generation or two. Kosovo's eventual status cannot be considered absent a parallel concern for the fate of the unity of FYROM. Indeed, the process that will eventually determine the status of Kosovo should involve Skopje as much as it will do Belgrade. Anything less than total commitment from the international community—and especially from the European Union—for the integrity of FYROM as it is today would be profoundly and irresponsibly destabilizing.

Meanwhile, violence has occurred in Albanian villages of south Serbia in the last few years. There is a significant Albanian population in Montenegro. It is a worrying feature of the current electoral campaign in Albania that the Kosovo independence issue has become a prominent part of the rhetoric. This is relatively new. The government in Tirana has behaved, in recent years, very responsibly with regard to this issue. In the current climate, however, the candidates will have to spend the coming weeks carefully avoiding campaign promises that lock them into commitments with dangerous consequences for regional stability. Greece, for instance, has been subjected to claims by a group representing those Albanians in northern Greece forced to leave after World War II because of their active collaboration with the Nazi occupation of my country.

One waits, so far in vain, for an unequivocal and unanimous commitment—from all Albanian leaders of all entities—that there will be no destabilization of existing

boundaries, as one proceeds along the path to Kosovo's final status. Likewise, one awaits from the international community an equal commitment to a process that incorporates guarantees for the entire region in the status talks on Kosovo. Anything less, on current experience, should suggest to any seasoned participant in the region's politics that the option of violence or irredentism cannot be excluded.

There are different types of nationalists in our region. There are genuine patriots, for instance, who draw on the traditions of their nations to build something new and vibrant. But there is another, more nefarious category: It features gangsters who cloak themselves in patriotism. They are the ones who use nationalism to promote their own greed or their own narrow institutional or partisan interests.

We have in the Balkans an alarming rise in the penetration of organized crime into the economy and into politics. To make matters worse, international organized crime has now made links with the Balkan mafias. In one sense, parts of the economies of the Balkans have become part of an international criminal franchise. In another sense, international organized crime seems to want to turn the Balkans into a beachhead for the penetration of the lucrative markets of Europe. It has become a daily battle among honest policemen, judges, politicians, and businessmen to hold at bay the encroachment of the black market, the illegal trader, the money launderer. Numerous international officials are deeply involved in this fight. It is central to the security of Europe.

Kosovo is no exception to the plague of organized crime. In fact, it seems to be an aggressive example of the disease —which is all the more embarrassing given that Kosovo is an international protectorate. This is not the work of the majority of citizens, but rather of a very few who manage to coerce others into collaborating or silently complying. These criminal networks already cross frontiers. So far, they have managed to operate with relative impunity. Curtailing the liberties taken by these groups is a key to the future role that Kosovo will play in the region.

Ultimately, though, we are confronted by the paradox of democratic politics in the region. Throughout the last decade, much blood has been spilt to create democratic governments. The quality of democracy might need a good deal of improvement. But constituency politics, lobbies, interest groups, and media all now play their full role in the politics of the region. It should be no surprise, then, that when confronted by an issue as commanding as the fate of Kosovo, politicians are cornered by their own electoral politics and instincts. This is true in any democratic system. Courage, vision, skill, and careful timing are required to break out of the accepted truths of a society in order to forge a strategic change of direction. In short, sacrifices are ultimately necessary—and sacrifices do not win votes. Yet the solution to Kosovo will require sacrifices. Such visceral issues as acknowledging killing, deciding on returns of refugees, attacking corruption, and settling financial debts are just some of the ingredients of a solution that will one day have to win public backing.

To avoid the task of negotiation and persuasion is to diminish the potential for democracy and to arouse deep and lasting resentment. Both in Kosovo and in Serbia, an honest and protracted public debate will be necessary. It is surprising how such an effort can gradually bring change. One has to acknowledge the recent efforts of the government of Serbia and its President to introduce some flexibility into the discussion on Kosovo. When Serbian officials now talk of "something more than autonomy and something less than independence," I see a creative effort to introduce an ambiguity that offers room for discussion. Likewise, impressive moves were being made by the recent Prime Minister of Kosovo—now indicted—to find ways to build confidence for flexibility in talks with Serbia.

These efforts should not be viewed through the prism of a foreign diplomat, but rather through that of a local democrat who is trying to build a constituency. It may seem more complicated and time consuming, but at least it is democracy creaking into gear. To short circuit this process would be to restrict democracy and create tensions in the neighboring democracies that are affected by Kosovo's fate. Imposing a solution too rapidly in Kosovo will prevent the very debate that is necessary to help it acquire the attributes of

sovereignty. Likewise, in Serbia, it will be the fodder for those who wish to play the politics of resentment and victimhood.

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What does the future hold? The body politic of the Balkans does not need another trauma. It needs therapy. Kosovo can provide this. It is an issue in which so many have a vested interest in an outcome that is successful for all. This means that the political leadership of Kosovo, Serbia, the region, Europe, members of the Security Council, and the Contact Group are all involved in a process that does not preclude any outcome but that is rigorous, disciplined, and comprehensive.

The issues of rule of law and democracy are fundamental to the European Union and have been core criteria for Union membership. These are the very values and practices that are now needed in Kosovo and must be secured in the region. I believe that the European Union is presented with an historic opportunity to assume leadership for the resolution of the Kosovo status question and to guide the process from negotiation to eventual accession of the region into the European Union.

This political process will begin soon. By autumn, the review of the standards process will have occurred. Thereafter, negotiations are expected to begin under the aegis of an internationally organized negotiator.

There are some rules of the game that might help frame the process and guide it to a successful conclusion.

a. It is a matter of urgency that the current impasse is broken and that efforts be made to find those few areas of common ground that exist between Belgrade and Pristina. There is no reason why this should wait until the start of formal negotiations at the end of this year. Small breakthroughs can alter the atmosphere

and dynamics of the larger process. It is in the interests of Kosovo Albanians to pursue such breakthroughs because they must demonstrate progress on the issue of standards. It is also in the interests of Belgrade, assuming that the Serbian government wishes to show it wants a palpable improvement in the living conditions of Kosovo Serbs. One particular area that merits attention and support concerns the protection of the Orthodox Churches. This should not be treated as an exercise in monument preservation, but rather as an acknowledgement of a living Orthodox Christian Church with its community.

b. The framework for the negotiations should ideally be the European Union, with the full cooperation of other states that have a vital interest in the issue. It is anomalous to be asking Europe to take the lead on the issue and not to expect it to assume full responsibility. The EU is the eventual destination of all the peoples of the region, and the EU should be authorized to proceed now by providing its lead forcefully. This should be done in cooperation with those members of the Contact Group that are not members of the EU, namely the USA and Russia.

c. The negotiations and the negotiator should be endowed with sufficient authority and means to address all the regional implications of the status talks. A budget, with a quick disbursing mechanism, should be made available to carry out activities and projects that will serve as incentives to the successful outcome of the status talks. The purpose is to provide a tangible momentum to the negotiations.

d. The discussion on status must not be limited to political and constitutional matters. The economic crisis of the region feeds discontent. It is imperative that the negotiations address a comprehensive plan for the economic progress of all the affected regions and countries.

Mr. Chairman, Congressmen:

I would like thank you for having taken the initiative to hold this hearing. In closing, I would like to stress that it is only through the combined efforts of the peoples of the region, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union that a secure, just, and hopeful settlement can be imagined and implemented. Our commitment to a peaceful solution must be sustained. It will require boldness, creativity vision, and resources. Your support is essential to this endeavor.